

# CHAPTER 1



## A School Culture of Equity

**W**hat is a school culture of equity? A school culture of equity is a fostered and cultivated attitude, expectation, and understanding of where students need to be and how to get them there. A school culture of equity is one where educators create a classroom, school, and system where excellence is achieved for every student, no matter who that student is or where that student comes from. In a school culture of equity, diversity becomes the norm, not the exception, and excellence becomes the norm for all, not the exception for a few. No matter how different and diverse the individual's background and characteristics might be, the equitable school culture embraces the uniqueness, strengths, and challenges of the student and provides equitable support, understanding, expectations, and encouragement to succeed. Equity can only occur in a culture where it is safe for adults and students alike to take risks, stretch, learn, and authentically engage day in, day out. In a school where this is possible, faculty hold themselves to the highest expectations and professional responsibility, while doing what is necessary to understand themselves and their students racially and culturally. In a school culture of equity, excellence and success become the norm for each student and every educator. In this book, you will meet educators who meet these qualifications and who engage in equity. The stories in this book, and the videos that accompany it, are those of real teachers in real classrooms. This is not a book of theory; this is a book of practice.

This book offers you a framework for examining school cultures of equity and the equity actions necessary to norm excellence and success for all. Written for administrators, teacher leaders, coaches, and pre-service teachers, this book provides you with models of equity as well as a framework to use to address equity in your school. In addition, in using this book, you gain access to an online community of educators where you can discuss videos of the successful schools described throughout the book. By joining the online community, you are engaging in a Equity 101 Book Study that is dynamic, live, and energizing—a powerful antidote to the possible boredom, invisibility, and hopelessness that might lurk behind a closed teacher’s door. Your voice is as important as every other voice, including ours, the authors, and you have the power to contribute and mold the ongoing conversation; so relax, delve into the book, and please join us for the online conversations based on the questions at the end of each chapter. Enjoy!

### **APOLLO MIDDLE SCHOOL—TUCSON, ARIZONA**

Driving up to Apollo Middle School, evidence that this school sits in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Tucson, Arizona surrounds you. Potholed roads. Dirt sidewalks. Dilapidated homes. Bars on all windows. Police patrols. And intimidating fences surrounding the school and the homes surrounding it. But this image belies what has happened within Apollo Middle School. In four year’s time, under the direction of Principal Ray Chavez, Apollo went from state takeover to the top 10% of all middle schools in Arizona. Yes, this was accomplished with great leadership. And yes, this was accomplished by changing the practices teachers apply with students everyday. But most impactfully, Apollo achieved this success because it fundamentally changed the culture of the school to rigorously support the students in a culturally relevant way.

In his office, Principal Chavez points to a piece of student art hanging on his wall, a crayon drawing of the character Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, and says, “That Eeyore was given to me by an eighth grader the year before I got here.” It is a photocopied worksheet of a line drawing of the forlorn donkey from Winnie the Pooh. It has blue crayon messily scribbled all over the picture. With firm conviction, Ray continues:

Coloring Eeyore in eighth grade is an absolute insult to that kid, to the parent, to our teaching profession. Any kind of way you want to describe it, a kid's insulted that way. No wonder the place was crazy! It's a logical extension of that kind of treatment to kids that the kids treat you the same way back.

Apollo Middle School was locked in a perpetual state of failure that not only killed the potential of the kids, but also impacted the morale of the teachers. Eeyore became a symbol for Ray of what Apollo fundamentally could not be:

Most people think it's just a silly thing. But I keep it there as a reminder to me we're never going there. If I find a teacher doing that, I will do whatever I have to do to make sure they're gone.

On arriving four years earlier, Principal Chavez joined forces with his assistant principal, Lorena Martinez. They established a BHAG—a *Big Hairy Audacious Goal*—that within four years they would reach “Highly Performing” status, which in Arizona would place them within the top 10% of all middle schools. Ray recounts that when he would attend administrative meetings and share Apollo's BHAG, other administrators “snickered” and thought, “You're just crazy.”

Ray was driven by a mission to succeed with Latino kids just like him. He grew up in the Sunnyside neighborhood not far from the school he was now leading. His wife taught in one of the feeder elementary schools and repeatedly expressed frustration in preparing younger children to have a chance, only to see them enter Apollo, get lost in the shuffle, and fall precipitously behind—almost as if the school was “preparing them to drop out.” Throughout his life, Ray had been involved in Chicano movements and had been an activist for change, even gaining notoriety as a member of the Mexican Studies team in neighboring Tucson Unified School District. His wife pushed him to get even more intentional about driving school change:

She told me, “Mr. Chicano, go and put your money where your mouth is. Take that school, and go do something with it.” The place was crazy. I mean there are not very many other words you can use to describe it. It was out of hand.

Beginning in the summer of 2007, the first task in front of Principal Chavez and his new administrative team was building the capacity of the teaching staff. Announcing the BHAG to the staff, Ray defined it in terms of equitable opportunity for the students of Apollo:

If I were to attempt to define equity for us, it's that access to opportunity for every one of my kids. Sometimes our kids in their life situation struggle a lot, and it's not any fault of their own. We need to try to make a place where if you come here and do your very best, things can change . . . If we have access to opportunities—I had a degree, a BA, an MA from the University of Arizona, another Master's degree from Harvard. I have opportunities. How can I get you [the student] in a position where you can exercise opportunities?

After laying out the performance goals and expectations of the teaching and support staff, more than 40% of the Apollo teachers either resigned or requested a transfer to another school—they simply did not believe the students of Apollo were capable of such high achievement. He even had one teacher who entered his office, handed in his resignation, abruptly said, “I will never work for a Mexican,” turned, and walked out the door. Their work was cut out for them.

Having to quickly hire almost 40 teachers over the summer to a school with a bad reputation of gangs and poor performance, Ray and his team knew they would not find Teacher of the Year-type veteran candidates. But what they could find were teachers who cared deeply for the students. They determined that it was far easier to train a teacher to teach effectively than to care deeply. Assistant Principal Lorena Martinez remembers collectively believing, “It's not going to be easy, but we're going to do this . . . we have a moral imperative to do this for this community.”

To move the focus of the students back on academics, Apollo instituted a number of positive behavior programs, including recognizing students with awards and rewards, pairing students with significant adults, and moving gang-prevention efforts from a “law enforcement” activity to a focus on alternate social and academic opportunities. All of this was paired with a significant increase in academic expectations for each and every student.

According to Principal Chavez, Apollo discovered a simple way to approach discipline with students:

We have lots of rules, but the one real rule is the *nana* rule. The *nana* rule is if your *nana* [grandmother] was standing right behind you, what would you do, or what actions and decisions would you make if she was standing right behind you, what would those be like? Every kid tells you the same thing. They'd be great. They'd be good because they're honoring their parents and their grandparents and so on. So that is an example of their culture manifesting itself in what we do here at the school. If you follow that rule, you're going to make gold and the kids get that.

This effort required a substantial amount of professional development, coaching, and teacher support. But the teachers quickly begin applying the new practices and expectations in the classroom, improving their effectiveness year after year. Principal Chavez described to the teachers how “[k]ids like to be challenged. They want it. If you pitch too low, they know when they’re insulted. If you pitch too high, they get frustrated, but they’ve got to be in that reach.” Educators focused on their strengths while incorporating new student-engagement practices. Teacher Kathy Mayorga says,

My style of teaching is still the same. It’s very structured. But I do lot more group work, a lot more accountability of the students, a lot of projects, incorporating the skills into projects, keeping the students actively engaged, and making it fun for the students.

Likewise, professional development focused on helping teachers provide intriguing and rigorous instruction. As students became more engaged and focused on the rigor, classroom management improved, and teachers began honoring the learning interests and readiness of individual students, an interesting phenomenon occurred, as described by Ray: “The rigor part creates relationships. The kids should be asking, ‘I’m having a hard time here. Help me.’” With improved relationships tied to increased rigor, teacher–student conversations became the norm. According to teacher Kathy Mayorga,

Teachers are out and visible talking to students. Students are accepting of that and are not afraid to ask for help, whether it’s

with the problem they're having at home, or it's a problem in school, or a problem with the work. It's also the teachers' attitudes changing—being here for students since the students are number one.

Within the first year, their effort started to have an impact. The staff had shifted from managing students to driving their academic achievement. The belief in the students' potential became palpable, and enthusiasm grew for the goals established by Ray. According to Assistant Principal Tammy Christopherson, it truly was the heart and commitment of the teachers that kept them on track for the BHAG through the first year:

We had very, very low skills actually with the teachers. But what we did have was heart. We had teachers who just wanted to be here. We had teachers who wanted to see it succeed. I think just the work ethic alone was pretty phenomenal and that energy just carried.

Apollo's initial focus and eventual success was built on creating cultural relevance for students. Principal Chavez states that “[l]ots of times schools approach education in a single model and our kids are not a single model.” Since kids were individually unsuccessful, Apollo needed to build a culturally relevant educational experience that individual students could connect with. According to Lorena Martinez, “When you tap into what a kid knows and his experiences, that's relevancy. And it's engaging and it's relevant to them and it takes what they come with into consideration, and the kids get into it.”

But cultural relevance in schools has had numerous iterations with varying degrees of success—multiculturalism, native language studies, historical and cultural focus on students' country of origin, culture celebrations, and so on. At Apollo, cultural relevance was defined as education that relates to the student's local and immediate experience. This could include references to country of origin, cultural traditions, language, and histories, but within the context of how this is experienced by the student day by day. Apollo's cultural relevance efforts also tapped into local current events, members of the community, and the student's own family to define what mattered to the student.

At the beginning of his teaching career, Ray Chavez discovered by accident the power of relevant instruction focused on the immediate, local, and cultural experience of the student:

I was a rookie teacher. I got hired in '82 in this building at Apollo Middle School. And my classroom was not your typical classroom. I didn't know what I was doing, and the kids are just running around making all kinds of mayhem in the classroom. I was reduced to guarding the door to make sure they didn't escape and go somewhere else to make problems. It was around the third week of October which means Halloween is around the corner, and the kids are starting to think about that. These two little girls are sitting right in front of me with the rest of the room in mayhem, and they asked me if I believed in ghosts. When I said, "No, there's no such thing," they looked down disappointed. Then I jumped in with, "But La Llorona is a whole different thing." And they perked up because they've never heard La Llorona discussed in a schoolhouse before—at home, yes, but never at school.

La Llorona translates into "The Weeping Woman," and is a widespread legend across Mexico and in Latino cultures of the American Southwest. The basic story is that a woman named Maria lost her children by drowning. She wanders around at night near bodies of water crying, "Ay, mis hijos! Ay, mis hijos!" which translates to "Oh, my children!" La Llorona is widely used in Latino culture as a cautionary tale for kids.

So we started talking about La Llorona. They called another kid up to join us. And so now the four of us are talking about this thing that they hear at home, and other stories and folktales that they're told at home from their parents or grandparents. We very quickly got involved in that discussion pretty deeply.

Then I looked around the room. Just a couple minutes before, this room had just been out of control, which was typical, but was now dead quiet. All the kids in the room were focused, pin drop quiet, which is not typical.

Well, pretty soon the bell rang. They were disappointed because the fun is over. But I told them, "Go home. Talk to your

folks. We're going to write it down, and then tomorrow in class we'll read them and share more." So they thought that was great. I didn't know what was going to happen that night. I was lying in bed thinking about it and wondering what will happen because I had begun to believe what people had told me about these kids.

The next day when the kids arrived at school waving their papers in their hands, I quickly read some of them. They were well composed. All the pieces of literature we've been trying to teach were in there. And that's the day I found out what was missing: the connection from their home to school, and in this case, it happened to be their culture!

So we studied *La Llorona*—that spectral presence that haunts waterways. We looked at waterways all around Arizona. I was being paid to teach Arizona history. So we examined how that story is told in any town in Arizona. We got the history of Arizona, the geography of Arizona. We got all the state standards, but we did it in a way that the kids thought was fun—it was a presentation method of the teaching that they understood. They had already learned it at home, so that mediation between their home culture and the school culture [was natural].

I was warned by some of the other teachers, "Better knock it off. These kids are not going to be able to pass that test." We had to pass the Arizona History test here in Arizona for eighth graders to get out of the eighth grade. My kids just crushed it because they learned very deeply in a different context!

Assistant Principal Lorena Martinez recalls the impact Ray had on his students when he made the shift to culturally relevant instruction. "All of a sudden he had every kid turned around. The entire attention of those kids was on Mr. Chavez because all of a sudden, they were talking about something that was relevant to them."

"If they don't see a value of what you're teaching them in their lives, they're not going to buy into it and make that effort to learn," says social studies teacher Steve Olguin. "So if you can make the things that they are supposed to learn relative to their daily lives, you're succeeding and you're respecting their culture." He has readdressed his whole curriculum so that it is culturally relevant for the students.



We were able to do that basically by getting to know the students better, getting to know their families better, and speaking individually to the mother and father. That really helped us understand the type of student that we are working with.

Another social studies teacher, Jennifer Trujillo-Johnson, says, “I don’t assign anything that wouldn’t be relevant to them in some way.” She reads from their heritage, folk tales, and current events. The students respond with pride to these stories: “Hey, this came from Mexico.” “This came from the southwest—that’s where I’m from!” “Hey I’ve heard that story.” “My nina told me that story, that’s cool!” “That story came from my culture.” Jennifer describes great success with these approaches because it taps into the prior knowledge of the students. Lorena Martinez reaffirms this in describing that the students “Know who they are. They know where they come from. The fact that we validate that validates themselves.”

This approach extends into the standards taught in the classroom. According to Mr. Olguin,

Anything that you teach be it the state standards or if they were national standards, you have to relate it to their personal lives. Otherwise if they don’t see a value of what you’re teaching them in their lives, they’re not going to buy into it and make that effort to learn.

For one unit studying the waves of European immigrants from the late 1890s to the early 1930s, he compared it to modern immigration—a relevant issue for these Arizona students who live less than 50 miles from the Mexican border, and most of whom are children of immigrants:

As you know, immigration is a hot topic here in Arizona. So while we’re studying the immigration issues of the late 1800s and early 1900s, we related it to the immigration problems we have now . . . So we’re learning the past but we’re also looking at today, the issues of today. And we’re trying to contrast them or find similarities between them. And surprisingly, a lot of the issues that were happening in the past are the same issues that we’re having today.

Trujillo-Johnson builds on these themes in her own class:

We read about border violence that's happening along the Mexican–U.S. border. And it was one of my most successful articles that I've done with them because it relates to a lot of them. I had one kid that's moved from El Paso to here to escape the violence. One kid's uncle was tortured. It was a lot of stories that were coming out and a really high interest piece of information for the class to get involved with.

Mr. Olguin continues, saying,

If you can make the things that they are supposed to learn relative to their daily lives, you're succeeding and you're respecting their culture. So I think that relativity makes it personal for the students and what they are learning. How is it going to help you today? How is it going to help you in life in the future? They buy into that.

This culturally relevant approach addresses a wider context than what is addressed in the textbook because it approaches learning directly based on what the students already understand. “This is about treating people with dignity and respect,” describes Martinez. “How much more dignity and respect than to dignify where they come from and what they know and bring it from there?”

Prior to Apollo Middle School's turnaround, there were limited relationships with the community. Students entered the gates of the school, but parents rarely ventured in. The staff discovered that it wasn't a lack of interest in their children's education on the part of the community. Rather, most parents came from Mexican and Central American communities where the cultural norm was to maintain a deferential relationship of respect toward the teacher, rather than to engage the teacher in personal dialogue about the child.

What Apollo realized was that parents needed educational and instructional services to successfully support their child through middle and high school, and on to college. Since the ultimate goal was to support student achievement, and parent engagement was critical in pulling this off, the staff at Apollo created an evening *Community School*. According to Principal Chavez,

It's [about] how you get the community involved in supporting the school and what happens in the school. The goal is to have Dad at a financing college work class, Mom down in a fitness room, the daughter working on the computer, and maybe the oldest son giving some tutoring lessons to elementary kids. The conversation on Saturday morning is probably going to be about Apollo Middle School and how it's an important piece of the entire community.

Since funding is limited at Apollo, there were not significant financial resources to put into parent and community support. Through grants, volunteers, and relying on resources already in place, Apollo created a robust parent and community program that included the following:

- Opening the computer lab with full Internet access to parents at night—this came after discovering most community members were waiting in long lines to share only two computer terminals at the local library
- Conducting computer and Internet literacy classes for parents
- Providing fitness classes and access after hours for parents and their children to the school's exercise room and gym
- Hosting workshops conducted by community service organizations, such as English language classes
- Providing after-hours tutoring for students, and training parents in how to support their children's homework
- Establishing a local law enforcement liaison at the school to work with parents
- Creating a college education course which introduces parents to the many facets of the U.S. college and university system, including
  - application procedures
  - college entrance exams
  - scholarships, student aid, and FAFSA application
  - introductions to local, state, and national vocational programs, junior colleges, and universities
  - field trips to local college and university campuses

The college preparedness class has been one of the most popular services offered at Apollo. Once, right before a field trip to the University of Arizona campus for students and parents, a student who was particularly interested in the visit suddenly said he could not participate. The student told the advisor that he could not attend because he and his parents did not have official permits to walk on the campus. Hearing that anyone is allowed to enter the campus, the student and his parents were relieved and excited to visit the university—the first time anyone in the family had ever visited a university campus.

The Community School has been very popular with parents and students alike. The goals at Apollo are always focused on increasing academic achievement, and the Community School has become a primary vehicle to empower the community in supporting the students. According to Chavez, “That’s kind of the driving force behind it, making our kids academic beings, and them understanding themselves being academic beings in this community.”

With parents and students alike, Apollo pushes a program called PASFUE: *Preparing All Students for University Enrollment*. The program focuses on helping students develop habits of mind and study, as well as the necessary attitudes so that students develop a college path within their minds. Consequently, the school ends up being a provider of options rather than a terminal experience. “Kids weren’t being provided options like that through the school,” describes Principal Chavez.

That’s a huge thing. That is a giant. Once a kid understands the options and you give them hope to accomplish options, get out of the way because once the kids are on that path, they understand why we’re pushing.”

The students readily speak to the changes that have occurred at Apollo Middle School. Eighth-grade student Rafael describes his school:

Before you would talk about Apollo and others would say, “Oh, it’s a fighting school. Oh, they don’t have anything good in there. Oh, it’s all bad. I don’t know why you go there.” And now, we want to prove to them that Apollo is the best. So we’re trying our hardest to make it the best.

Students naturally strive for excellence. Academic success happens when students see that the school is fully aligned with their own drive for achievement. As described by Ray, “It just seemed like the kids were waiting for somebody to tell them, ‘You’re smart and you’re good,’ because those are the two things that we had a reputation of being: not smart and being bad.”

Apollo has moved from perennially failing to one of the top performing middle schools in Arizona. This is based on the increase in AIMS, the *Arizona Instrument to Measure Success*, scores. The educators took it to the students, as described by Principal Chavez:

I told the kids, “Look where we are. If you’re happy with this thing, you’re going to have problems here because we’re not going to be staying here. We’re going to go up.” And so the first year, we went from underperforming year two status, past year one, passed underperforming, and then we got to performing status the first year. The second year we went to performing plus status, except on the low end of that scale. Last year, we went to performing plus status on the high end of that scale, and just missed highly performing status by one point in the measurement!

In four years’ time, not only had Apollo Middle School shed its failing status, but it had also climbed to nearly the highest ranking of Arizona schools. It is a remarkable achievement that has not gone without notice—or without doubt. As described by Samantha, an eighth-grade student,

When we went from failing to performing they had like all this FBI people coming in here, and checking on the kids, and making sure they were doing it right, and that they weren’t cheating and stuff. And they had that going on like the entire time there was AIMS. And the next year, they just left it alone because they knew that we were doing everything right, and that we were just literally excelling towards better!

Apollo is proof that demographics and perennial failure do not have to stand in the way of substantial student achievement gains. When educators fully commit to modify the school in every way necessary, improve their instructional practices, and make learning culturally relevant, students readily connect with the increased

rigor, trust the relationships with educators, and excel in their academic performance. Alexis, a student at Apollo, testifies to this: “It feels like they care. And they do want you to understand what they are teaching.”

Ray Chavez describes what Apollo has done as radical and at the front line of civil rights activism:

I used to be an almost militant activist in terms of the Chicano and Mexican-American community. I was involved in a lot of things that would be considered pushing that envelope a lot. But this right here might be the most radical thing I’ve done because people expect kids to fail here. We’re not supposed to be having these kinds of results. And that other thing of wanting to do good for your community in almost this radical way—I don’t know if you could find a more radical thing to do than to flip this school completely on its head, and go put it in people’s faces that these kids can excel at any kind of level!

The equitable culture of a school matters to its educators, parents, the community, and especially to its students. When the culture of a school focuses on developing high expectations, rigorous instruction and engagement for each and every student, cultural relevance in terms of what students learn, and strong connected relationships between teacher and student, there is no limit to how far a school can progress. When it works well—when a school is like the well-cultivated soil in a productive garden—school culture can overcome any limiting factor and succeed with any demographic difference brought by the student. The best schools are not those with perfect practice, but rather those that have created an environment where every student and every educator is supported in taking risks to grow, and is understood and fully accepted for whoever he or she is—no matter how wonderfully diverse the individual might be. This is the power of equitable school culture: the power of excellence in education.

Principal Ray Chavez summarizes the work by stating, “I don’t know if you could find a more radical thing to do than to flip this thing completely on its head and go put it in people’s faces that these kids can excel at any kind of level.” The change in school culture that he and his staff accomplished at Apollo Middle School demonstrates what a group of educators can do when they

engage in the seemingly radical act of simply achieving excellence for all students.

## Equity Terms

To fully execute an equitable environment, it is necessary to have both common languages and practices among the staff in a school. Following are key terms and definitions that can guide your studies in this book and also in your personal and institutional professional development.

*Equity:* Justice, fairness, and freedom from bias or favoritism

*Race:* The color of one's skin; different from racism, which is prejudice based on skin color, and institutionalized racism, which is prejudice plus power

*Diverse:* Characteristics that differ from the majority norm, especially in terms of race, gender, economics, language, and culture

*Culture of Equity:* An environment wherein individuals are provided with what each personally needs in terms of resources and support, rather than receiving equal portions regardless of need

*Equitize:* Deliberate effort to shift an inequitable environment or situation toward equity rather than simply making things equal

*Equity Lens:* Analyzing a belief, situation, or action using equity as a basis for understanding

*Equity Action:* Defined action or engagement that builds equity within a culture and/or environment

*Cultural Competency:* Understanding the background, values, norms, and characteristics of one's own culture and the culture of others

## Equity Discussion

Chapter 1 shares the story of profound school culture change at Apollo Middle School. Throughout this chapter, you read about the steps that Principal Ray Chavez and his staff took to accomplish this

change. Please engage in the following activities to analyze equity according to what Principal Chavez and his staff accomplished, and how that compares to your own work.

Online PD 360 conversations:

- How would you describe what occurred at Apollo Middle School?
- How does your school foster or not foster student achievement?
- What works, what doesn't, and what is being done to develop a culture of high achievement at your school?

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**Equity Lens: Professional**

Describe your professional challenges in terms of supporting all diverse students.

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**EQUITY ACTION #1**

What challenge might you address first? What actions might you take?

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